Award Number: W81XWH-12-1-0382

TITLE: Biomarker Discovery in Gulf War Veterans: Development of a War Illness Diagnostic Panel

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REPORT DATE: October 2014

TYPE OF REPORT: Annual

PREPARED FOR: U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command
Fort Detrick, Maryland 21702-5012

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE 10/17/2014	**2. REPORT TYPE** Annual	**3. DATES COVERED 0**9/20/2013 – 09/19/2014

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE

Biomarker Discovery in Gulf War Veterans: Development of a War Illness Diagnostic Panel

5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
W81XWH-12-1-0382

5b. GRANT NUMBER

5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER

6. AUTHOR(S) Lea Steele, Ph.D.

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5d. PROJECT NUMBER

5e. TASK NUMBER

5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)

Baylor University
700 South University Parks Drive
Waco, TX 76706 - 1003

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER

9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)

U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command
Fort Detrick, Maryland 21702-5012

10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)

11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Approved for Public Release; Distribution Unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

At least one in four of the nearly 700,000 U.S. veterans of the 1990-1991 Gulf War are affected by Gulf War illness (GWI), the chronic condition currently defined only by veterans' self-reported symptoms. Previous studies have identified neurological, inflammatory, endocrine, and hematological measures that significantly distinguish groups of GWI cases from controls. Using state-of-the-art biodiscovery techniques, the present study is designed to identify a biological signature for GWI that can be used clinically as a diagnostic blood test. A multiphase case-control design is used to canvas a broad spectrum of blood analytes in three independent samples of Gulf War veterans. The multiplex assay platform includes a diverse array of cytokines, chemokines, growth factors, hormones, hematological measures, and neurotrophic factors, and provides highly replicable and accurate quantitative values for each analyte. The pattern of analytes whose values most reliably distinguish veterans with GWI from healthy controls in the first two "development" samples will be assembled, and tested in the third "validation" sample, to determine the test's sensitivity and specificity for diagnosing GWI and/or identified GWI subgroups. If successful, the availability of an objective test for diagnosing GWI will be immensely beneficial to veterans and their healthcare providers, and provide an important tool for improving research to better understand and treat GWI.

15. SUBJECT TERMS

Gulf War veterans, Gulf War illness, biomarkers, diagnostic test, multiplex assay

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			**17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT**	**18. NUMBER OF PAGES**	**19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON**
a. REPORT	**b. ABSTRACT**	**c. THIS PAGE**			USAMRMC
U	U	U	UU	11	**19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER** *(include area code)*

Biomarker Discovery in Gulf War Veterans:
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Introduction

Since their return from the 1990-1991 Gulf War, at least one in four of the nearly 700,000 U.S. veterans who served in that war have been affected by the condition known as Gulf War illness (GWI).[1-3] Gulf War illness is characterized by a complex of multiple chronic symptoms, typically some combination of persistent headache, widespread pain, cognitive difficulties, unexplained fatigue, gastrointestinal problems and diverse other abnormalities. Although individual symptoms can vary, studies report a generally consistent pattern of chronic symptoms across different Gulf War veteran populations. Longitudinal studies indicate that few veterans have recovered, or substantially improved over time.[4,5] Gulf War illness has, as a result, presented a difficult challenge for a large number of veterans for over 20 years.

For many ill veterans, the difficulty of living with chronic illness is accompanied by additional problems when seeking medical care. Physicians can be exceptionally challenged by veteran patients reporting this array of diverse symptoms—multiple, persistent symptoms not accounted for by established medical or psychiatric diagnoses and not explained by interpretable abnormalities on standard diagnostic tests.[6] Although some physicians are knowledgeable about problems of this nature, many veterans continue to report frustrating experiences with healthcare providers who are not familiar with GWI or similar problems, and may even be dismissive of veterans' illness as psychosomatic or malingering.

The pathobiology of GWI appears to be complex. Previous studies have identified neurological, immune, endocrine, and hematological measures that significantly distinguish groups of GWI cases from controls.[7-21] None of these measures, however, provides sufficient sensitivity and specificity to diagnose GWI. GWI is currently identified clinically and in research studies only on the basis of veterans' subjectively-reported symptoms. An objective test for use in diagnosing GWI would be immensely beneficial to veterans and their healthcare providers, and would also provide an important tool for improving research to better understand and treat GWI.

As has been described elsewhere,[1,22] there is considerable evidence to suggest that the diverse symptoms and biological alterations associated with GWI reflect a persistent disruption in central nervous system (CNS) proinflammatory and neuroendocrine parameters. These processes can precipitate, sustain, and respond to peripheral changes in immune, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA), autonomic, and hematological parameters. Reported differences in these systems are more subtle than the frank "abnormalities" identified with standard diagnostic tests (e.g., measures indicating adrenal failure, clotting abnormalities, or defective immune competence). These more subtle differences have been detectable only by comparing group values between sick and healthy Gulf War veterans. No single measure provides values that are distinct enough, or "abnormal" enough to serve as a suitable diagnostic marker on its own. The multisystem nature of GWI suggests that the diagnostic test that can best identify individual veterans with GWI, in the near term, may require evaluation of more than one measure, whose values are considered together.

The present study utilizes state-of-the-art biodiscovery techniques that canvas a broad spectrum of blood analytes to develop a limited panel of assays that can be combined onto a single

multiplex platform specific to GWI for use as a GWI diagnostic tool. Blood levels of 190 proteins associated with immune, inflammatory, endocrine, and neurological processes that potentially underlie the symptoms of GWI are analyzed using a two-phase, case-control design. In the initial "development" phase, multiplex assay results from two independent samples of 75 veterans (each with 45 GWI cases and 30 controls) are used to determine the biomarker signature pattern or patterns that best distinguish GWI cases from controls. In the second, "validation" phase, this biomarker signature will be evaluated in a third sample (90 GWI cases, 60 controls) to assess its sensitivity and specificity for identifying GWI cases and/or GWI subgroups of importance. An important aspect of the multiplex laboratory methods used in both phases is the provision of highly accurate and replicable quantitative values for each assay. This approach holds particular appeal, since the subgroup of analytes that most reliably distinguishes GWI cases from controls can readily be developed for use as a diagnostic tool in the clinic setting that uses a small blood sample, at a relatively low cost.

This interdisciplinary research study is led by a team of experienced GWI investigators and statisticians at Baylor University, working with clinical researchers at Scott & White Healthcare and laboratory scientists at Myriad-Rules Based Medicine (M-RBM), the company at which the biomarker discovery process used by the project was developed. The M-RBM multiplexed assay platforms have been widely used by the pharmaceutical, biotechnological, medical, and basic research communities for discovery and validation of biomarker patterns indicative of specific diseases, subgroup differences in clinical drug effects, and other purposes. The M-RBM process utilizes a platform that couples the precision of Luminex technology with the accuracy of automated liquid handling. This platform provides quantitative Multi-Analyte Profiles, or MAPs, of blood proteins using very small sample volumes (10-20 μL) over a dynamic range of fg/mL to mg/mL and intra-assay imprecision rates typically below 10 percent. In addition, all assays in M-RBM multiplex platforms are validated to Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (CLSI) guidelines and are run using a calibration/control strategy required for clinical laboratories. This approach therefore standardizes both the multiplex assay technology and the methodologies by which it is applied. These capabilities represent an important step forward for translating an identified biomarker profile into a clinically useful test.

In conjunction with the biomarker discovery process, the project involves a two-phase analytic effort to both develop and test algorithms for identifying GWI cases and, potentially, GWI subgroups. A number of bioinformatics and biostatistical techniques will be utilized by two independent analytic teams, at Baylor and M-RBM, to characterize assay patterns that distinguish GWI cases from controls. This dual analytic approach maximizes the potential for the project to provide the most informative and usable GWI case profiles from the collected data. In addition, the Baylor analytic team will determine whether unique patterns are associated with GWI subgroups of interest

If successful in developing a GWI-specific multiplex panel that identifies GWI with sufficient accuracy, the project will provide a major step forward for improving medical evaluation and care of veterans with GWI. It can also advance other aspects of GWI research, for example, by providing an objective measure for monitoring the effects of treatments evaluated in clinical trials.

Body

Task 1. Prepare and Submit Documents to Obtain Regulatory Approvals

This project requires human subjects review and approval by two Institutional Review Boards (Baylor and Scott & White IRBs) and by the USAMRMC's Office of Human Research Protections (HRPO). We also initially understood, based on information provided by DOD officials, that the project would require review and approval by the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB), under the federal Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA). We were informed that the OMB approval process typically requires a minimum of eight months. We therefore designed the project timeline to allow ten months for obtaining regulatory approvals, as indicated in the Statement of Work.

Our initial strategy was to begin the process and document submissions required for OMB review and approval prior to HRPO and IRB submissions. This was because we understood that OMB approval would be needed to obtain our initial sampling data from the Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), and because the OMB approval process typically takes much longer than the IRB process. However, in a concurrent study, we were experiencing extended delays and considerable difficulties in connection with the DOD offices responsible for reviewing and forwarding our PRA documentation to OMB. As of November 2012, these delays had extended the timeline anticipated for OMB review to a minimum of 15 months. We learned, in early 2013, after multiple requests, contacts, and discussions, that the DOD Information Management Office determined that our study would *not* be subject to the federal PRA and that OMB approval would not be required.

We obtained initial Baylor IRB approval for the project in August 2013, and Scott & White IRB approval November 5, 2013. Baylor IRB approved the minor modification requested by Scott & White's IRB on November 21, and we were able to submit full human subjects' documentation to the Army Office of Human Research Protections (HRPO) on November 26, 2013. Final Army HRPO approvals and authorization to proceed were provided on March 27, 2014. Subsequent project delays associated with obtaining DOD data required for developing our 3 study samples for the project are described below.

Our original timeline for this task anticipated that regulatory approvals could be obtained 10 months into the initial project year. The delays described have resulted in our being considerably behind schedule. Subject recruitment and data collection are not yet underway. We have, however, obtained continuing review IRB approvals from Baylor (September 4, 2014) and Scott & White (August 19, 2014), and submitted both to the HRPO continuing review office the 2nd week of September, 2014.

Task 2. Identify and screen three stratified random samples of Gulf War era veterans for study participation

This project was developed to establish a diagnostic tool for Gulf War illness, and so was designed to obtain blood samples from three independent "gold standard" population-based samples. Sampling and recruitment therefore requires that 1991 Gulf War veterans be contacted proactively from random samples of veterans residing in a defined geographical area. As proposed and previously approved for this study, this is to be accomplished by obtaining data from DOD's Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) that includes names and contact information for veterans residing in our target regions.

Our research team, as well as other CDMRP GWIRP-funded investigators had previously worked with DMDC to obtain this type of data for sampling and recruitment purposes. We had been in contact with the DMDC management team prior to submitting our data request for the current project, which was identical to an earlier request submitted for a previously-funded GWIRP project. In March 2014, we became aware of serious challenges that have emerged for research institutions applying to DMDC to obtain data for research studies. These difficulties, associated with recently established DMDC Privacy Office requirements for IT credentialing and authorization of data release, have now delayed the process of obtaining data for the initial project by about 9 months.

We initially delayed submitting our DMDC data request for the current project, anticipating that the IT requirements could be worked out in relative short order. However, when no solutions were found over several months, we consulted with the DMDC management team with whom we had worked in planning the data request. We determined that it would be most advantageous to proceed with submitting the DMDC data request for the current project so that sampling data could be obtained as quickly as possible once the IT issues are satisfactorily addressed. We formally submitted our DMDC data request for the current project on July 20, 2014. Despite inquiries, however, DMDC has not yet provided us with information on review of our request by their human subjects' office or privacy office. Therefore, no data have yet been obtained, the target samples have not yet been assembled, and no recruitment activities have been initiated.

In the event that the IT issues cannot be resolved in the near term, we have developed contingency plans to utilize other approaches to subject recruitment for a separate project. These plans include two backup recruitment strategies. Alternate Recruitment Strategy 1: Recruitment of veterans in the Central Texas region, identified through VA's Gulf War Registry. This preferred alternate recruitment strategy involves contacting veterans currently enrolled in the Central Texas VA's Gulf War Registry. We understand that a number of issues will need to be worked out with VA to make this possible, but consider this "2nd best" option preferable to others because a sample of veterans recruited in this way is more representative of Gulf War veterans overall than expected with other recruitment methods. Alternate Recruitment Strategy 2: Use of media outreach, working with veterans' organizations, and scheduled events to alert area Gulf War veterans about our studies and invite their participation. This represents a more conventional subject recruitment effort, working through our public affairs office and local media, as well as area veterans groups, national Gulf War veterans groups, and local chapters of national veterans

service organizations (VSOs) to reach out to Gulf War veterans in Central Texas. However, a study sample identified in this way is expected to be considerably less representative and likely to introduce a degree of bias in our study results.

In order to move forward in the coming months, it may become necessary to adopt these alternate recruitment strategies for the current project. We hope that this will not be necessary, however. Use of a population-based sample is especially important for the current project, to ensure that veterans in whom Gulf War illness diagnostic algorithm(s) are identified and developed are suitably representative of the larger population of veterans with Gulf War illness.

In preparing for study startup we have also worked with Baylor's Center for Community Research and Development (CCRD) in programming and formatting the Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) software to be used for the telephone screening interviews to be conducted for subject recruitment. All screening and data collection instruments have been finalized. The prototype program for the computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) screening survey has been completed by CCRD and is ready for testing.

Task 3. Collect and freeze blood samples from 300 Gulf War veterans comprising 3 independent population samples

As previously described, our inability to obtain study sampling information in order to recruit and screen veterans for the study has meant that no start date has yet been established for beginning subject intake and blood collection. We have, however, held planning meetings to discuss details of study start up with our clinical partners at Scott & White, who will have primary responsibility for drawing the blood samples for the study. However, no activities related to blood collection have been initiated at this time.

Tasks 4 – 6.

No activities completed or underway at this time. No blood samples have been obtained, no analyses have been initiated, and no research results are yet available.

Key Research Accomplishments

Only regulatory submissions and finalizing study protocol, instruments, and clinical site planning have been accomplished to date. Data collection has not yet been initiated.

Reportable Outcomes

There are no manuscripts or other reportable outcomes at this time.

Conclusion

No research results are yet available; no conclusions can be drawn at this time.

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